

Study Abroad: the “discomfort zone”

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This section aims to highlight the problem of the real perception of the study abroad experience in Florence and how the role of the teacher becomes fundamental, contributing significantly to debunk the image of the cultural context in which students will be immersed, or not, during the study abroad experience.

The “contact” with the Florentine reality, or rather with Florence (as Pisani says in his article in this same issue), actually takes place long before the arrival of the students, when, with the mediation of ambassadors’ students and dedicated offices, study abroad education is encouraged.

Study abroad is promoted precisely because it should allow students to acquire intercultural communication skills in order to make them more flexible and increase cultural empathy; this also means a path of discovery and rediscovery of the self, and an acceptance of the challenges that the impact with a new culture imposes.

Eric J. Leed points out in his *The Mind of the Traveler* (1991), that, in all cultures, “travel is the most common resource of metaphors to explain transformations and transitions of all kinds, the journey allows a rediscovery of our more ancestral impulses, often taking on the meaning of a sacred moment for its potential for transformation, rediscovery and motivation for the individual”.

This travel metaphor explains the central role of the teacher, capable through the various methodologies adopted, to accompany the students towards a conscious immersion in a new cultural context, overcoming stereotypes and offering the tools for a correct interpretation of reality.

From a psychological point of view, the journey continues to represent a search for “authenticity”, a laceration of one’s living space and affects, an act of destruction followed by a reconstruction that will require determination, empathy, and spirit of adaptation (MacCannell).

This means opening ourselves to the unknown, to novelty, to the discovery of a new symbolic and communicative system. The meeting with the other is a way of acquiring knowledge and at the same time an awareness of ourselves in the world.

In this perspective, study programs abroad can represent a valid tool, responding not only to requests for professional training and enriching students' curricula, but also (and above all) for the "global" development of the individual, educating students in cultural dialogue and in the recognition of the needs and structures of sense of the other.

The use of categories such as "we", "me" and "you" often represents a lifeline for students who find themselves handling an unfamiliar and environment which is often perceived through a stereotyped narrative. The latter is aimed, on the one hand, to protect from any dangers that the authentic encounter with another culture entails, and, on the other hand, to convey what MacCannell defines as "staged authenticity".

The stereotyped narrative of the cultural context becomes reassuring, with the consequence that there is really nothing left to discover, or what is discovered is perceived as a cultural accident or an occasion for cultural shock, a vision often relegated to the discovery of a different ritual for breakfast, or for the shopping experience in a supermarket or surprise where the English language is neither spoken nor understood. Systematically, when asked to report a cultural incident, the students simply identify the wait for the bill at the restaurant, the espresso at the bar, the narrow sidewalks.

This discomfort space often leads American students to search for places that are most familiar to them, for example places frequented only by their compatriots, experiencing the encounter with "the other" as potentially dangerous and non-productive.

One gets the impression that students are looking for a copy of a typical day on the main campus, disguised as aspects of inter-culturalism or alleged challenges which are nothing more than everyday situations; this reinforces stages of ethnocentrism in the students and a tendency to continue living in one's "bubble" or "comfort zone". Actually, the acqui-

sition of a higher level of awareness of inter-culturalism means pushing towards discomfort, abandoning the protection of stereotypes and the image of "staged" Florence, to begin a process of understanding of what an intercultural skill really represents.

In this context, the teacher becomes a fundamental actor in the students' journey, who will experience the authenticity of their academic term abroad not as a limit, but as a resource for personal growth. The methodologies adopted by the teacher become fundamental tools of this process; methodologies not only based on a theoretical system, but also knowledge mediated by direct contact with the cultural context in which the students will be immersed for four months and developed in multiple forms – for instance, the several outdoor activities organized within each course.

In this sense, the methodologies developed by the teachers are strongly and positively influenced by the intercultural context in which not only students, but also teachers are immersed.

As Bracci says in this same issue of *Beyond*, it is a question of teaching *with* students rather than teaching *to* students, a terminological change that implies a profound meaning in the understanding of a different cultural context.

A flipped classroom, as its name suggests, is a class where the lecture and homework have been reversed. In other words, the practice problems normally completed at home are worked on in the classroom, and the direct instruction normally given during class time is given as homework through video lectures, reading assignments, or some other direct instruction delivery method. (Szparagowski, p. 2).

This new teaching mindset brought practical changes - less lecturing, more in-class activities and more class discussions - but the most significant was the cultural change which I was metaphorically going to embrace: I began to see the classroom as an environment in which 'learning' was the

most relevant part, not 'teaching'; I rapidly convinced myself that what students were and are learning is fundamental, and I began to realize that the teaching process was part of the learning, of my learning process as well (Bracci, p. 2).

The aim is to stimulate the students' curiosity by involving them in the teaching process, disentangling away from the "students-consumers" logic, and transforming them into active subjects of the learning process, inviting them to think critically and to accept the numerous challenges to which they will be subjected as resources rather than limits.

This assumes the need to replace the memorization of notions with a process of reflective, critical, and authentic involvement, in which, as stated by Pisani in his essay, students discover *Firenze* instead of Florence.

The teacher provides the students with the tools that can allow an authentic and real intercultural navigation; the aim will be to appreciate the differences and confront the concept of diversity, starting that path of cultural sensitivity that will take them from an ethnocentric world view to an ethno-relativist vision (Bennett).

In this sense, the teacher can promote the process of awareness of a different cultural context that allows the students to know not only the "front regions", but especially all the "back regions" (Goffman), developing new and unexplored dimensions of reality, which help them understand that their own "culture" is one of the many possible, especially in the contemporary context, which is increasingly globalized and interconnected (and, for this reason, more and more complex).

With regard to methodologies used in the classroom, an introduction to the historical context is an effective tool. In each course a brief, but exhaustive explanation of the history of the city in which the students live, but "do not live" at the same time, is particularly valuable. Every weekend is an opportunity to visit a European capital, with the consequence that (in most cases) Florence will be seen but not experienced ex-

cept during the last week, before returning to the United States).

Not secondary is the perception by the students of where their apartment in Florence is located; if not exactly situated within the landmarks of the city, it is considered part of the sub-urban area. This makes it more difficult to explore the cultural context in depth, thus favoring ethnocentrism.

Walking tours become unique opportunities to let the students discover the co-existence of the two dichotomous aspects of the city, the tourist Florence (super crowded, global) and the *Firenze* of small artisans, shops, parks, local markets (all unknown and often not sought, but equally relevant in the process of developing intercultural sensitivity).

The narrative of the study abroad experience collected over the years of teaching, usually reports the pre-packaged script before departure. This approach is also strengthened by media narratives, such as *Under The Tuscan Sun* or *Lizzie Maguire*, which are often used as a methodological tool precisely to induce students to a deeper reflection of the experience which will then report to other students on their return to the United States, in turn becoming interpreters of the narrative.

Despite being art, food, fashion, family, and the sense of beauty elements that distinguish Italian identity, that make Italy one of the most popular destinations in the world, it is also necessary to keep in mind the contemporaneity of what today characterizes Italian culture. As Birindelli states in his article, “the image of the Italian extended family that gathers every day around the dining table, with several children running around the house, is false: Italy has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world and that extended family exists only in a mythical rural past”.

The narrative script that students bring with them in a different and complex cultural context can end up strengthening the students’ ethnocentrism, which, in turn, imposes American culture as a reference model and makes the shift to the phases that Bennett identifies as ethno-relativist complex, based on a model of development of intercultural sensitivity.

In conclusion, the methodologies adopted by the teacher, thanks

to an appropriate balance between traditional teaching and experiential learning, can increase the students' emotional and cognitive impact, thus favoring and encouraging greater active participation in "real" life. Differently, the risk is that students are not actors, but mere spectators, without developing the ability to master intercultural contexts, thus experiencing every difference with their own culture as a source of stress and – sometimes – culture shock.

In defending their own comfort zone, students would risk to adopt reference and behavioral models that only imitate the exposure to a different set of rules and behaviors.

Our aim as teachers is to guide students in their mediated experience, with the general purpose of providing them with the tools to bypass stereotypes on their own.

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